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The meaning of life as interpreted by Henryk Elzenberg and Tadeusz Czeżowski

In the catalogue of universal and most important philosophical issues, the problem of meaning occupies one of the most prominent places. There is no shortage of statements that describe the issue of meaning as the most fundamental topic of philosophical reflection. This is the view of those who say that *"the meaning of philosophy is the search for meaning"*. When we ask the question: why is something happening in the world this way and not differently? Why should we act this way and not another? Is there any justification for something being the way it is? – these questions seek the meaning of something, why it is this way or why it should be this way and not otherwise. Various answers to the question of why this is so are possible: from, we do not know, till, it is an answer confirming the existence of meaning or the possibility of its realisation.

Accepting the latter answer allows to distinguish specific types of meaning:

A distinction can thus be made between rational meaning – the search for the meaning of the world is the search for its rationality,

Teleological meaning – meaning is what is purposeful, a system purposefully constructed.

Axiological meaning – this type of meaning “is closely related to value”.¹

Logical sense – “synonym of the word – meaning”, also called “semantic”.²

The knowledge and experience of the last few decades of the unprecedented destruction of the natural world will force a reflection on the notion of a global sense or perhaps a sense of civilisation.

This is not the only possible classification of meaning.

And in terms of subject matter, we most often formulate questions about the meaning of being, the meaning of existence, the meaning of life, also the meaning of dying and death, about which the most eminent philosophers of various epochs have expressed so many wise thoughts. Among those mentioned here, the issue of the meaning of life is the most frequently analysed and considered, a very interesting subject of reflection for great thinkers, but also for each of us, when in a moment of reflection on our life, especially in borderline situations, we ask about its meaning. The abundance of statements on this subject is astonishing, ranging from the statement that “the meaning of human life is the search for the meaning of life” to the pessimistic conclusion that “there is no such thing as the meaning of life or the meaning of death”. Different concepts of meaning have emerged over the centuries. They were expressed by Pythagorean, Platonic and Aristotelian thought (in the following order: number, idea, concept of purpose), the Cartesian cogito, Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason, Kant’s conviction that a rational being is capable of fulfilling moral duties, Hegel’s question about the meaning of history, and further thought by Kierkegaard, Rickert, Husserl, Heidegger, Adler, Frankel, Levinas. This is almost the entire history of philosophy and it is impossible to refer to it here in even the most concise outline. What remains, therefore, is a choice – and we are making such a choice – of two Polish philosophers who have devoted their attention to this issue: Tadeusz Czeżowski and Henryk Elzenberg. Why these thinkers? For several reasons at least. First of all, both scholars had a lot of wise and important things to say on this matter. Secondly, both are among the most outstanding representatives of Polish intellectual culture of the 20th century. Thirdly, their work enjoys unflagging interest and their philosophising successfully resists the passage of time

¹ Henryk Elzenberg, “Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu”, in: *Pisma aksjologiczne*, compiled by Lesław Hostyński, Andrzej Lorczyk, Agnieszka Nogal, (Lublin: UMCS Publishing House, 2002), 177

² Ibidem.

and, with the successive experiences of collective thinking and culture, retains its cognitive attractiveness also for the contemporary public, acquiring, in different situations and times, new and valuable interpretations and meanings. And it was probably for these reasons that the conference organisers decided to devote a separate session to a reflection on the intellectual output of the two thinkers, which includes the subject of this speech. I also think that, for us gathered in this very place (Nicolaus Copernicus University), it is certainly not without significance that these thinkers associated a significant part of their creative life with the university in Toruń. They created a philosophical environment, significantly shaping its spiritual image and intellectual culture, first in Vilnius and then in Toruń, and it was here that the culmination of their intellectual development and creative activity took place.

It is significant that both thinkers shared a long path of life together, lasting over thirty years, at the universities of Vilnius and Toruń, bound by constant close cooperation, friendship and mutual respect for each other's achievements. We emphasise this fact, aware that this community of similar biographies and friendly references had no counterpart in the symbiosis of philosophical thinking. At the same time, these people, who were very close, as scholars, differed considerably in the way they conceived and practised philosophy and understood its vocation, thus giving a very eloquent testimony to the actual possibility of realising Norwid's postulate of differing beautifully, but also to the conviction that the world in its existential, human and axiological dimension can be described in various ways from the perspective of philosophy, and that these various ways of describing it contribute something important and significant to its overall picture. After all, Czeżowski is a representative of the famous Lviv-Warsaw philosophical school, of which Elzenberg was a critic. This school, whose founder was Kazimierz Twardowski, finds its identity in a particular methodological stance and the associated convictions that philosophy should be scientific, analytical, operating with the tools of contemporary logic, separated from worldviews, renouncing speculative inquiries but also, by the same token, many traditional philosophical problems. Czeżowski considered the method of analytical description, based on the use of formal logic, to be the basic tool of cognition. He placed particular emphasis on the development of the methodology of science, devoting a lot of attention to the analytical method and various forms of reasoning. He believed that every science is an interpretation of logical theories, from which the principles of constructing its sentences and the principles of reasoning taking place in it are taken. The various sciences, which he divided into axiomatic and empirical, are interpre-

tations of some logical, apodictic or probabilistic system. The scientific nature of philosophy is based on a logical structure and the scientific methods used within it, such as analytical description, the intersubjective verifiability of assertions and the relationship with empiricism. He built the foundations of empirical ethics and did not reject metaphysics because he believed that it could be practised in a scientific way.

Elzenberg, on the other hand, was mainly concerned with axiology, ethics and aesthetics, and developed an axiologically oriented vision of the world and man, directing attention towards a general theory of values, seeing it as the basis for ethics and aesthetics. This very issue, together with the philosophy of culture and reflection on literature, marked a completely different circle of interest for him.³

He opposed the apotheosis of rationalism and logical formalism, the monopoly of discursive thinking, with the view that there is a need to reach the irrational basis of reality, and that knowing the essence of things requires that the investigations of reason gain an ally in intuition, figurative and metaphorical thinking. He believed that in this way the complexity of human subjectivity with its moral and aesthetic reality could be more accurately captured.

While maintaining a distance from the great social problems, historicism and sociology, he directed his attention towards the human individual, created an individualistic and personalistic conception of man, and turned towards the world of moral and aesthetic values.

His philosophical stance and way of philosophising was characterised by anti-dogmatism and the accompanying conviction that, in philosophical reflection, it is important to leave all meaningful possibilities for understanding the world and man open and not to strive at all costs for unequivocal solutions and final results.

In Polish philosophy of the last century, he occupied a position of distinction, following his own thought path. He was believed to be the embodiment of the coexistence of opposites, because his thought was not free from antinomies. He was an outstanding intellectual who pointed out the limitations of the intellect and emphasised trust in intuition. He criticised rationalism and adhered to the principles of rational thinking while leaning towards irrationalism. He combined historiosophical pessimism with a belief in the possibility of perfecting the human individual. He persevered in his search for the meaning of life, while seeing the smallness and meanness of the world. He recognised the evils of human

³ Włodzimierz Tyburski, *Elzenberg*, series: *Myśli i Ludzie* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna 2006), 30–53.

nature and advocated respect for human subjectivity. His vision of the world and of man was pervaded by dualism. He saw an insurmountable gap between the subjectivity and individuality of the human individual and the world of things and collective life.

Elzenberg opposed cultural axiological relativism and utilitarianism with a philosophy seeking absolute values, called them perfect, and distinguished them from utilitarian ones. He believed that only they could give meaning to human life. He pointed to the specificity of axiological cognition and argued that competence in this area does not derive directly from intellectual skills, as *the organ of cognition of the valuable world* – is above all – *the personal value of the person getting to know it*.

While emphasising the clearly visible differences in the ways of understanding philosophy and its style of practice, it is also worth pointing out what both thinkers had in common. Definitely the jointly emphasised importance of axiological reflection and the associated reflection on the philosophy of meaning, but above all, faithfulness to the world of values that they justified in their theoretical reflection and determinedly implemented in various circumstances appearing on their difficult path of life. This is best evidenced by their biographies. Let us cite just two examples. Elzenberg's ardent patriotism and love of freedom led him to join the Riflemen's Association and the First Brigade of the Legions, and then to take part in the battles of 1920. During the grim period of the occupation, both scholars were devotedly involved in the work of the underground university in Vilnius. And when Czeżowski wrote his excellent essay on *Courage* in those times of horror, anxiety and overwhelming fear, the issue of courage was for the professor not only a subject of theoretical reflection, it was not just a matter of emphasising educational activities aimed at making this virtue a reality, but was above all a difficult existential experience. He experienced it very closely when he survived selection for execution in occupied Vilnius, and also when he unhesitatingly saved people of Jewish nationality. For his acts of great courage, the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem honoured the Professor by including him among the *Righteous Among the Nations*.

A certain set of beliefs about the ethos of the scholar was also common to both thinkers. The issue of the ethics of scientific work and the scientist's deontology was particularly developed in numerous statements by Tadeusz Czeżowski. He believed that the main task and ethical duty of an academic was to strenuously strive for the truth and to be faithful to the truth. By proclaiming the truth, the scholar thus serves society, fulfilling his or her moral obligations to it. The directive of fidelity to the truth, contained in the code of professional ethics, provides the scholar

with the self-knowledge of his or her vocation, setting a direction that reveals the meaning of his or her work and research effort.

Tadeusz Czeżowski emphasised that fulfilling the postulate of discovering and proclaiming the truth is not only a matter of the scholar's qualifications, but also a matter of his ethics, strongly emphasising the organic connection between methodological and ethical rule. To create it, a scientist should respect certain rules of conduct. Among these, he singled out the principle of scientific criticism, the principle of scientific integrity, objectivity and impartiality and the freedom of science.

The issue of the meaning and value of life is a subject that Czeżowski takes up, motivated not only by the need to define himself theoretically in relation to this issue, so multifaceted in the history of philosophy, but also to attempt to answer the questions posed by practical philosophy, which is proudly called the teacher of life. This topic is a kind of culmination of his reflections on the related issues of happiness, suffering, freedom, fear and anxiety, courage, lies, the value of dialogue, and attitudes towards the world. In undertaking it, he uses the method of analytical description, developed mainly for other fields of reflection, with excellent results. As a consequence, a position is developed in which the analytical context is enriched by a value-oriented and even metaphysical perspective. First, therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between three meanings of understanding sense when we relate it to life. The first is internal meaning: a person's life is a meaningful whole when the objectives of his actions, whether partial, intermediate or final, are united by a unifying thought, forming a harmonious, coherent, non-contradictory system. We then say that meaningfulness is a certain component, graspable, harmonised whole. Such criteria of meaningfulness belong as much to human life as to works of art, but they are also an essential component of logical and scientific thinking, in any form. However, these are not sufficient rationales that ultimately determine the meaningfulness of life. After all, a well-structured, logically coherent set of activities can also serve unworthy purposes. It is therefore necessary that the goal organising the action is worthy of life, is a worthy goal. Therefore, it is indispensable that meaning is associated with value. And in order to make sense of life in the above meaning, one must possess the ability to distinguish between the right and the wrong, between what is better and what is worse, and to set reasonable goals. If we add perseverance in the pursuit of a goal, i.e. a strong will, such an alliance of the intellectual, ethical and volitional factors form the ethical character of man, which is a prerequisite for giving meaning to his life. "In order to determine the meaning of life", writes Czeżowski, "any system of ultimate goals, even

harmonious ones, is not enough; these goals must be assessed in terms of values, and this happens in a specific way. In order to explain this let us introduce the term *a goal worthy of life*".

Summing up this fragment of his reflections, Czeżowski states: "life has meaning if it has been arranged in such a way that it forms a whole aiming rationally towards the realisation of the best goals, which we are capable of realising under the given conditions. In order to make sense of life in the above meaning, one needs, firstly, the ability to distinguish between what is really good and what is good only on the surface, and between what is better and worse, and secondly, one needs to make an effort to persistently pursue one's goals. This ability is life wisdom, while the ability to make an effort in pursuit of a goal is called strong willpower. The two factors together form a person's ethical character. [...] The prerequisite for making sense of one's life is therefore to develop an ethical character".

The second distinction emphasises the social dimension of the meaning of life, which, according to this interpretation, is realised by going beyond individual goals, participating in collective life, in the creation of socially and culturally valuable tasks. The social meaning of human life is determined by the value of the creations that a life leaves behind. At the same time, it is important to realise that the intrinsic value of an action remains, even when the traces of a good deed are fading.

Careful reflection reveals yet another way of understanding the meaning of life – philosophical, as it relates people's lives to the world conceived as a whole, of which the existence of each individual being is a part. The starting point of the reasoning is the following supposition: *If the world as a whole has meaning, its components also have meaning*. Assuming, and this is the premise of scientific inquiry, that the world has a logical and harmonious architecture we recognise that each part fulfils its proper role. At the same time, it is the philosopher's clear polemic against those concepts that assume disharmony in the world and deny faith in the meaning of life.

In summing up these analyses, Czeżowski draws an analogy between the search for the meaning of life and actions aimed at solving a mathematical problem. *After all, life is like a task that man has to solve, and the meaning of life is the solution that has to be found. [...] He who finds the right solution will make his life meaningful*".⁴ In times marked by a crisis of meaning, Czeżowski wants to rebuild and strengthen faith in the mean-

⁴ Tadeusz Czeżowski, "Sens i wartość życia", *Ruch Filozoficzny* 21 (1962): 65.

ing of life. He does so in an open but unimposing way, rather he outlines the framework of a rational discourse on meaning and areas of sensible action, shows the reasons for possible choices, leaving each of us the right to make specific decisions.

On the other hand, Elzenberg took the question of the meaning of life and one's own existence as the starting point of axiological reflection. He is convinced that the interest in meaning stems from the strong human need to make sense of life and to exist in a meaningful world. But meaning cannot be given to human life by an act of will. The meaningfulness of our lives is inextricably linked to the realm of value, as value creates meaning and gives meaning to life, which necessarily flows from values. It therefore rejects subjectivity and the consequent belief that something is valuable to me, that I determine the framework of meaning. On the contrary, "it is the objective value and it is this alone that gives us that priceless good – the meaning of life". Therefore, "meaning is what we are looking for, the fruit that falls from the tree, but not accidentally, but only when we become convinced of the existence of objective values".⁵ It is the value of an object that gives meaning to its existence. Meaning is therefore a derived phenomenon. It depends on value, duty and rightness. Therefore "the very existence of an object of value makes sense. He goes on to say "meaning is the very existence in a world of values or containing values: an act acquires meaning by being positively directed towards a value", "Meaning is the sum of acts composed of objects of value (or merely containing objects of value)".⁶

Elzenberg moves from these theoretical conclusions to an attempt to determine the meaning of the human situation in social life and history from a category perspective. He is most active on this subject in his excellent work *Kłopot z istnieniem* [*The Trouble with Existence*], as well as in his philosophical, moral and literary essays, which are *freer in their thought*, but which attract attention with their elegance of style, wealth of associations and metaphors, suggestiveness of language, and insightful analyses. His thoughts put into an aphoristic form and collected there constitute a summary record of the philosopher's state of mind, spirit and intellectual experiences. He referred to them as mere excursions into the realm of ethics, philosophy, religion and literature, but in fact, they are a mine of reflections, analyses, intriguing insights, surprising

⁵ Elzenberg, "Aksjologiczne pojęcie sensu", 184–185.

⁶ Ibidem, 186.

conclusions and bold, often discussion-provoking observations. In *The Trouble with Existence*, reflection on man and his vocation comes to the fore. It is set against the backdrop of a pessimistic vision of collective life and history. He contrasts the evil world of interpersonal relations with the world of spiritual creativity, elevating man above the surrounding natural and social world and his own nature, convincing that man can build his own meaningfulness against the meaninglessness of his environment. The barbarism of our times stems from the undermining and shattering of authentic values. In this situation, the duty of an honest man is to act in such a way as to go through life with honour. This is what ethics is supposed to teach, which for the philosopher is the science of manly behaviour towards being.

However, Elzenberg's pessimistic vision of history, social life and man does not lead him to ultimately doubt the meaning of human life and to resign himself to all-pervading evil, but forces him to look for opportunities to overcome or at least weaken such an image of human nature, social life and history. This is evidenced by the philosopher's belief, not devoid of hope, in the existence of a feeble stream of good history, as well as the idea of *a man rising above himself*, who in this act builds islands of sense in a world of senselessness. These feeble *streams of history* can balance and even overcome the streams of *evil history*, because goodness, Elzenberg says, has a greater weight than evil, and a pinch of it thrown on the scale can overcome the enormity of wickedness. The dark vision of history is not their only image, just as the belief in the flawed, evil nature of man does not provide grounds for total anthropological pessimism. For it is possible to contrast man's evil nature with the noble, value-creating aspirations inherent in it, and to fight against that which hinders the efforts of the human individual to uplift himself, to rise above his own nature and to set himself on the path of a life of value.

The idea of the existence of streams of *small* and *good* history, the *idea of man rising above himself* and the deep belief that there are things *higher and more perfect than others* – this is the philosopher's conviction that the world is becoming *something acceptable to which a sense of purpose can agree*.

Elzenberg's idea of *man rising above himself* and in this act searching for meaning, and Czeżowski's conviction that human life is like a task that man is given to solve – the dream of life, in turn, is a solution that must be found – these are the convictions of philosophers who, by pointing out the directions of the search for what is really important in life, help us to think about it better, more accurately, more deeply.

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Streszczenie

Problematyka sensu, w jego ramach sensu życia, jest jednym z najbardziej poczesnych tematów filozoficznej refleksji. Teoretyczna zaduma nad sensem pozwala na wyodrębnienie określonych jego typów. Jest więc sens logiczny, sens racjonalny, sens teleologiczny, sens aksjologiczny, sens globalistyczny albo cywilizacyjny. Zaś w ujęciu przedmiotowym najczęściej formułujemy pytanie o sens bytu, sens istnienia, sens dziejów, sens życia, także sens umierania i śmierci. Problematyka ta to nieomal całe dzieje i nie sposób tu do nich odnieść się w najbardziej nawet zwięzłym zarysie. Pozostaje zatem wybór i dokonujemy takiego wyboru – dwóch filozofów należących do ścisłego grona najwybitniejszych przedstawicieli polskiej kultury intelektualnej – Henryka Elzenberga i Tadeusza Czeżowskiego.

Problematykę sensu i wartości życia podejmuje Czeżowski motywowany nie tylko potrzebą teoretycznego określenia się wobec tak wielorako rozumianego zagadnienia, ale także podjęcia próby, które stawiane są przed filozofią praktyczną. Rozróżnić należy trzy znaczenia rozumienia sensu, gdy odnosimy go do życia. Pierwszy to sens wewnętrzny: życie człowieka jest całością sensowną, gdy cele jego działań, te częściowe, pośrednie i ostateczne związane są jednoczącą je myślą, tworząc układ harmonijny, spójny, niesprzeczny. Ten rodzaj sensu konstytuuje sojusz czynnika intelektualnego, etycznego i woliowego. Drugie rozróżnienie akcentuje społeczny wymiar sensu życia, który realizuje się poprzez wykraczanie poza indywidualne cele, udział w życiu zbiorowym, w kreowaniu społecznie i kulturowo wartościowych zadań. Trzeci rodzaj sensu życia – filozoficzny odnosi się do życia ludzkiego i świata pojmowanego jako całość, którego częścią jest egzystencja każdego jednostkowego bytu.

Elzenberg pytanie o sens życia i własnego istnienia uznał za punkt wyjścia aksjologicznej refleksji. Sens nie może być życiu ludzkiemu nadany aktem woli. Sensowność naszego życia nieodłącznie powiązana jest ze sferą wartości, bowiem wartość stwarza sens i nadaje sens życiu ludzkiemu, z konieczności płynie on od wartości. To nie ja wyznaczam ramy sensowności – przeciwnie – wartość obiektywna i właśnie tylko ona daje nam to dobro bezcenne – sens życia. Sens uzyskujemy wtedy, gdy „dobijamy się przeświadczenia o istnieniu wartości obiektywnych”. Sens jest więc zjawiskiem pochodnym, gdyż wartość przedmiotu nadaje sens jego istnieniu. Zależy od wartości, powinności, słuszności.

Słowa kluczowe: sens, klasyfikacja sensu, sens życia, sens życia – właściwe rozwiązanie, sens i wartość.

Summary

The problem of meaning, including the meaning of life, is one of the most prominent themes of philosophical reflection. The theoretical reflection on meaning (sense) allows to distinguish specific types of meaning. There is logical sense, rational sense, teleological sense, axiological sense, globalist or civilisational sense. In terms of subject matter, we most often formulate the question on the meaning of being, the meaning of existence, the meaning of history, the meaning of life, and also the meaning of dying and death. These issues cover almost the entire history and it is impossible to address them here in even the most concise outline. What remains, therefore, is a choice – and we are making such a choice – of two philosophers belonging to the inner circle of the most eminent representatives of Polish intellectual culture, Henryk Elzenberg and Tadeusz Czeżowski.

The issue of the meaning and value of life is taken up by Czeżowski, motivated not only by the need to define himself theoretically in the face of such a multifaceted issue, but also by the attempts that are put before practical philosophy. It is important to distinguish between three meanings of understanding sense when we relate it to life. The first is internal meaning: a person's life is a meaningful whole when the objectives of his actions, whether partial, interme-

diate or final, are united by a unifying thought, forming a harmonious, coherent, non-contradictory system. This kind of meaning is constituted by an alliance of intellectual, ethical and volitional factors. The second distinction emphasises the social dimension of the meaning of life, which is realised by going beyond individual goals, participating in collective life, in the creation of socially and culturally valuable tasks. The third type of meaning of life – the philosophical one – refers to human life and the world conceived as a whole, of which the existence of each individual being is a part.

Elzenberg took the question of the meaning of life and one's own existence as the starting point of axiological reflection. Meaning cannot be given to human life by an act of will. The meaningfulness of our lives is inextricably linked to the realm of value, as value creates meaning and gives meaning to human life, which necessarily flows from values. It is not I who sets the framework of meaningfulness – on the contrary, it is the objective value and it is this alone that gives us that priceless good – the meaning of life. We gain meaning when "we become convinced of the existence of objective values". Meaning is therefore a derived phenomenon, as the value of an object gives meaning to its existence. It depends on values, duty and rightness.

Keywords: meaning, classification of meaning, meaning of life – the right solution, meaning and value.